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ABSTRACT

This project is a unit of six lessons designed to study and understand the roles and expectations of women in the colonial period. The unit provides an historical perspective on those expectations, examines how both men and women viewed the sphere of women, and how enlightened thought on this topic began to emerge during this revolutionary time. Primary source materials are used extensively. This unit is designed with the intent of maximum flexibility so that it may be used in parts, or in its entirety. The lessons develop a range of student skills that are identified with each lesson, such as note taking, organization, critical thinking, writing, oral participation, cooperative learning, research and analysis. The lessons include: (1) "The Sphere of Women in Colonial America"; (2) "Colonial Women: Using Documents for a Better Understanding"; (3) "Letters between Abigail and John Adams Regarding Women's Enfranchisement, 1776"; (4) "Dear 'John'"; (5) "The American 'Revolution'"?; and (6) "New Rights in the Old South?" (EH)

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The Sphere of Women in Colonial America

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Stratford Hall Summer Seminar Project; August, 1994

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The Sphere of Women in Colonial America

Statement of Purpose:

The project is a unit designed to study and understand the roles and expectations of women in the colonial period. It provides an historical perspective on those expectations, examines how both men and women viewed the sphere of women, and how enlightened thought on this topic began to emerge during this revolutionary time. Primary source materials are used extensively. The unit is designed with the intent of maximum flexibility such that it may be used in parts, or in its entirety.

Student Objectives:

Students will engage in a wide range of learning activities and techniques.

Lesson I: background material/lecture.
skills: note taking, critical thinking, organization

Lesson II: DBQ - Document Based Question; introductory level
skills: organization, prioritizing materials, looking for major themes, note taking

Lesson III: short answer essay/group discussion
skills: understanding primary sources, critical thinking, writing skills, oral participation

Lesson IV: role play letter write
skills: cognitive thinking, essay writing, bringing together information from many sources, organization

Lesson V: small group discussion
skills: cooperative learning, critical thinking, oral participation

Lesson VI: seminar: essay with small group discussion; high level
skills: critical thinking, cooperative learning, oral participation, essay writing, research, applying historical perspectives to contemporary situations.

The Sphere of Women in Colonial America

Lesson I
background material/lecture

"Do you Suppose the mind of woman the
only work of God that was made in vain?"
- Elizabeth Southgate
(Berg 11)

Most modern day Americans take for granted the concept of legal equality between the sexes. Few would argue that girls be allowed an education equal to that of boys and few would argue that a woman has the right to attend college and go on to a career, perhaps without a husband, if she so desires. It is apparent however that although possibilities exist, a great deal of prejudice in the political and business arenas do also. In 1991, only six percent of voting members of the U.S. Congress were female. Close to half of all employed women worked in relatively low-paying service and administrative support positions such as health aids and secretaries, and women workers were less likely than male workers to have pensions plans through their employers or union. Among the elderly, women were twice as likely as men to live below the poverty line. American women only earn 72 cents for every dollar earned by men in comparable jobs. In 1989, the median annual income of a female *college* graduate exceeded that of a male *high school* graduate for the first time -- by a $100. Even this gain however was as much because his income decreased as because her's increased (Ries 34).

In the 218 years since Thomas Jefferson penned "all men are created equal" we find that this phrase still rings somewhat hollow. Equality is still a goal rather than a reality. Of course, one needs to ask "What exactly did Jefferson mean?" He must be remembered in the context and times of colonial Virginia and in his status as a slave holder. Despite the innovative and democratic notions expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the men who signed it were social and racial conservatives. Slaves, free blacks, women, Native Americans, non-Protestants, even white men who lacked the necessary wealth to insure

themselves a "stake in society" were excluded from all of the rights of full citizenship. The founders of our nation were men who shared the prejudices and narrow visions of their day. A number of years after the Revolution when the daughter of General Schuyler wrote to Jefferson to ask about the proposed new federal constitution, he answered that she should not agitate herself, for " . . . the tender breasts of ladies were not formed for political convulsion" (Sochen 73). It is not surprising, then, that no revolution in women's rights, legal or political flowed from the revolution of 1776. Although great progress has been made in the direction of civil rights since then, it is apparent that *WASPY* males continue to be the power brokers in American society and that women, among other minority-status groups, continue to have a long uphill battle ahead of them.

The roots of this discrimination are centuries if not thousands of years old. They are deeply rooted. Perhaps the institutions that worked the most diligently in oppressing women were the European Christian churches. According to church doctrine: "Womankind was obviously inferior to man because Eve had been second in the order of creation. Her complicity with the serpent had completed her subjection, for had not an angry God, in meting out punishment for the first time, declared, 'The desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee' " ? (James 7). St. Thomas Aquinas went so far as to say "Woman was created to be man's helpmate, but her unique role is in conception . . . since for other purposes men would be better assisted by other men" (Sochen 19).

Men and women alike accepted the theory that subjection of the weaker sex was preordained. The Bible, primarily the Old Testament for the Puritans, was the major source of authority in all human affairs.

> 'The common laws here shaketh hand with divinitye. . . .'
>
> Under common law a woman was considered legally dead once she married. She ceased to exist because marriage made her one person with her husband, and he was that one person. She could not be a witness in court, control her earnings, choose where she would live, or control her property. Her husband was legally entitled to beat her if she disobeyed him. She herself was the property of her husband. He could hire her out as a servant to anyone he chose and pocket her wages. If she ran away from him with the clothes she was wearing she might be considered a thief for stealing herself and the clothing, for both belonged to her husband. (Spruill 340)

Life in colonial America was at best hard and brutish. In the vast and dangerous frontier areas, mere survival was the primary goal. A woman was faced with strenuous household tasks combined with little if any leisure time and a husband, church, and government all teaching submissiveness and respect to the supposed laws of God which repeatedly warned wives to "submit your selves unto your . . . husbands" (Ephesians 5:22). Equal rights for women was not an issue among these sixteenth and seventeenth century colonial Englishmen and women. Subordination was seen as a correct and fixed part of the social order. Rich or poor, male or female, every person had his/her place in society and each needed to fulfill his/her role and duties or chaos would result.

As the impending American Revolution approached however, a few brave souls commented upon the ironies of the war aims. America was suffering from British tyranny, but were not all men potential tyrants if their base instincts were not held in check by reason and virtue? This essentially pessimistic view of Human nature lay behind Abigail Adams' discussion of the proper form of an American government, and she believed that it applied equally to domestic government. In her view, the forces governing human relationships were the same, whether the parties involved were nations or families. "That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit no dispute" (Gelles 14). Yet in another letter: "Whilst you are proclaiming peace and goodwill to Men, Emancipating all Nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power or Wives" she told her husband and member of the Continental Congress John Adams (Witney 4:5).

Thomas Paine, best known for his famous essay on freedom "Common Sense", was the exceptional male radical of the period. In 1775, he wrote two brief pieces on the subject of women for the Pennsylvania Magazine which called : "Reflections on Unhappy Marriages" and "An Occasional Letter on the Female Sex." Both challenged traditional views. In his letter on women, he criticized all cultures' restraints upon women that prevented the development of their natural inclinations and talent. "Our [from a woman's perspective] duties are different from yours, but they are not therefore less difficult to fulfill, or of less consequence to society . . ." (Paine). While seemingly mild and non-threatening by today's standards, this was revolutionary thought, even in an age of revolution.

Indeed the radical male political theorists of the day, though they challenged Britain's rights to rule and promoted the truly revolutionary idea that the people should participate in their own government, did not extend their radicalism to the realm of women and the family. Most

American radicals and conservatives alike, shared Benjamin Franklin's view that marriage was an institution completely in harmony with natural laws: the man was its natural head, and the women obediently followed his lead. Hence, there was no need to change the institution. But who decided whether any institution was natural or unnatural? Clearly, the men.

In March of 1776, Abigail Adams once again wrote to her husband who was with Congress in Philadelphia. This letter, between a wife and her husband, has become one of the benchmarks of the women's rights movement. Abigail wrote: "By the way, in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power in the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation" (Akers 43).

The Continental Congress, however, had no plans to overhaul common law and Abigail Adams' plea for the ladies was so unexpected that her husband did not take her seriously: "As to your extraordinary Code of Laws," he wrote back to her, " I cannot but laugh" (DePauw 203). John Adams wrote to a colleague:

> It is certain , in theory, that the only moral foundation of government is the consent of the people . . . . But to what extent shall we carry this principle? Shall we say that every individual of the community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent . . . ? Depend upon it, Sir, it is dangerous to open so fruitful a source of controversy and altercation. . . .There will be no end of it. New claims will arise; women will demand a vote. . . and every man who has not a farthing, will demand an equal voice with any other, in all acts of State. (Berg 1990)

If only Adams had known the power of his crystal ball.

John Trumbell mocking penned:

> And why should girls be learned or wise,
> Books only serve to spoil their eyes.
> The studious eye but faintly twinkles
> And reading paves the way to wrinkles.
> (Kerber 185)

A presumably logical interpretation of Abigail Adams and her "Remember the Ladies . . ." letter based upon contemporary values would be to conclude that she was demanding equal political rights for her gender. This is not true. Actually, such an idea was very far from eighteenth century thought and the conception of a woman's sphere and character. Mrs. Adams did not call for a revolution in the roles of men and women. She hoped rather for a more enlightened educational system allowing girls equal opportunities with boys and most importantly for a legal system under which women could find maximum fulfillment in their ascribed roles as wives and mothers, as domestic partners deferential to fathers and husbands. Abigail wrote to her friend and like-thinker Mercy Warren ". . . the all-wise creator made woman an help-meet for man, and she who fails in these duties does not answer the end of her creation (James 7). To her husband she wrote: "Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection, and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness" (Gelles 14).

Yet the private solicitude of these two women for the condition of their sex, their conscious dignity, and their faith in education put Abigail Adams and Mercy Warren in the forefront of a slowly advancing enlightenment of opinion. While neither lady questioned submission, Mercy Warren was moved to write:

> While we own the Appointed Subordination (*perhaps for the sake of Order in Families*) let us by no Means Acknowledge such an Inferiority as would Check the Ardor of our Endeavors to equal in all Accomplishments the most Masculine Heights, that when t[illegible]e temporary Distinctions subside we may be equally [illegible]ed to taste the full Draught of Knowledge and Ha[illegible]s prepared for the Upright of every Nation and s[illegible]. . . (James 72)

Unfortunately, the seeds of change in the rights and roles of women which reformers such as Thomas Paine, Abigail Adams, and Mercy Warren, among others, planted, were to lie dormant for many years. Ironically "civil rights and liberties" became a back seat issue in the confusion and excitement of the new nation. Slavery, which was slowly dying before the revolution was given new life with the advent of the cotton gin. With their sometimes protectors the British now gone, Native Americans were left to alone confront the juggernaut of expansionist minded Americans. The egalitarian principles of the Declaration of Independence had obvious implications for women, but in the decades following the Revolution, enlightened ideals came into

conflict with the code of ladylike behavior which emphasized the differences rather than any equality between the sexes. The gap between rich and poor widened dramatically. As the newly independent American nation's inferiority complex arose, upper-class women strove to demonstrate they were as good as conservative, non-reform minded European women of the "better sort". American female aristocracy therefore grew less independent and their status relative to men declined. Working-class women on the other hand were too busy struggling with strenuous domestic duties, repressive laws and survival on the vast frontier to be concerned with legal niceties such as equality.

And so passed a unique group of revolutionary women who were nurtured on the ideas of the enlightenment and the possibilities inherent in forming a uniquely new nation and society. Post-revolutionary America had no use for their ideas. "Remember the Ladies . . ." wrote Abigail Adams in 1776, but Americans quickly forgot. In 1840, Charles Francis Adams, the grandson of John and Abigail, wrote:

> The heroism of the females of the revolution has gone from memory with the generation that witnessed it, and nothing, absolutely nothing remains upon the ear of the young of the present day. (DePauw Remember. . . . intro.)

It would take the approach of another war, this time the American Civil War to rekindle that revolutionary spirit. While abolitionists, mostly women worked hard to set men free, they observed the irony of their own situation. The seeds planted a century before burst forth as war clouds once again gathered.

Lesson II
DBQ

Colonial Women: Using Documents for a Better Understanding

In an effort to better understand the "sphere of women" in the colonial period, the following documents are provided. Look through each of them making sure to highlight and/or make notes alongside as to what you think are the relevant and important points made by each document.

Use the documents and your notes as evidence to support a one page essay either in support of extending women's roles in the eighteenth century or in support of maintaining the colonial status quo, i.e. that men are superior and women should confine their interests to household duties.

Make sure that you use at least three specific quotations to back up your argument. Parenthetical reference by just citing the document. e.g.: (Doc. A). You need not use all the documents.

Document A

> Woman is the gate of the devil, the path of wickedness, the sting of the serpent, in a word a perilous object. -St. Jerome

Document B

> In the frontier surroundings of colonial life, all education inevitably deteriorated, and that of girls, being the least essential in the economy of that day, suffered the most. Women's strenuous household tasks, requiring the complete processing of food and clothing for large families could be little aided by education and left no leisure for enjoying its benefits.

Document C

> Women also had a dangerous side, which had to be carefully watched and controlled: their sexuality. This was the power which, in the form of Eve, tempted and lured innocent Adam out of the Garden of Eden and introduced sin into the world. Woman as temptress, warned the New England and Virginia ministers, was a constant evil to watch for and prevent from expression.

Document D

"The Spirit that prevails among Men of all degrees, all ages and sex'es is the Spirit of Liberty." - Abigail Adams, 1775

Document E

". . . my ambition will extend no further than reigning in the Heart of my Husband. That is my Throne and there I aspire to be absolute." -Abigail Adams

Document F

"Whereas my wife, Mary Oxendine, hath eloped from me, this is to forewarn all persons from Harbouring or entertaining her, day or night, or crediting her in my name, as I am determined not to pay any debts by her contracted. All masters of vessels or others, are hereby cautioned against carrying her off the province, as they may expect to be prosecuted with the utmost severity. - She is of fair complexion, with light colour'd hair, and has a mark over one of her eyes." - an ad from a South Carolina newspaper

Document G

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." - Declaration of Independence

Document H

"When a small brooke or little river incorporateth with the Thames (River in London), the poor rivulet looseth her name; it is carried and recarried with the new associate; . . . . A woman as soon as she is married, . . . [is] overshadowed; she hath lost her stream. Her new self is her superior; her companion, her master . . . ."

Document I

"Do you suppose the mind of woman the only work of God that was made in vain"?

Document J

"Now say, have women worth? Or have they none?
Or had they some, but with our Queen isn't gone?
Nay masculines, you have thus taxt us long,
But she, though dead, will vindicate our wrong,
Let such as say our Sex is void of Reason,
Know tis a Slander now, but once was Treason.

- Anne Bradstreet, in reference to the late Queen Elizabeth I

Document K

". . . you must not tell many people of it, for it is scarcely reputable for young ladies to understand Latin and Greek." -John Adams' response to his daughter Nabby upon learning that during his, John's, long absence at the Continental Congress, his wife Abigail had Nabby tutored in the classics.

Document L

Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists (lovers) are in the right when they endeavor to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a play-thing.

-Mary Wollstonecraft

Lesson III
short answer essay/group discussion

Letters Between Abigail and John Adams Regarding Women's Enfranchisement, 1776.

Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776.

. . . I long to hear that you have declared an independency, and by the way in the Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hand of the husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex.

John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776.

. . . as to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but Laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government everywhere. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient -- that schools and Colleges were grown turbulent -- that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented. --This is rather too course a Compliment but you are so saucy, I won't blot it out. Depend upon it -- We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems . . .

Abigail Adams to John Adams, May 7, 1776

I cannot say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and goodwill to Men, Emancipating all Nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives. But you must

remember that Arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken -- and notwithstanding all you wise Laws and Maxims we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our Masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet . . . .

Questions for Thought:

Questions for the first letter from Abigail:

1. Does Abigail sound eager for American independence?
2. What does she hope will happen when independence is declared?
3. Why does she accuse her husband's ancestors of being ungenerous?
4. How does this threat echo America's struggle for independence?
5. For what reasons do you think that she was serious/not serious?
6. Do you agree that all/most people are/would be cruel and demanding if they had the power to get away with it?

Questions for John's response:

1. John compares women to several groups, what do these groups have in common?
2. What is the general tone of the response? Why do you think it was written so?
3. What consequences might John foresee if he followed Abigail's suggestions?
4. Say for a moment that John completely agreed with his wife Abigail. How successful do you think he would have been in arguing such a proposal in Congress?

Questions for Abigail's response:

1. What does Abigail say will happen if women are not given political rights?
2. Why is her solution to the lack of women's rights so faint-hearted?
3. Do you think that she was genuinely disappointed by John's response? Why or why not?
4. What power do you think Abigail is threatening to exercise?
5. How serious was Abigail? What do you think she really expected to get from her pleas and protests?

* adapted from "Remember the Ladies"

Lesson IV
role play letter write

Dear *John*:

Put yourself in the shoes of a colonial "feminist". Write a letter to Thomas Jefferson, member of the Continental Congress and author of the Declaration of Independence. Express why you think that women should be given more equality. Remember not to write anything beyond the time of the American Revolution (1776-1782). What reasons can you think that women *deserve* more recognition? What arguments can you think of which will actually convince the Continental Congress to change its collective mind? Why do you think TJ was so exclusive when he wrote "all men are created equal"? How could you challenge him on that an the fact that he was the owner of a large plantation and approximately two hundred slaves?

Lesson V
small group discussion

The American *Revolution* ?

Most revolutions throughout history cause violent upheaval in society. The French and Russian Revolutions are examples where the entire social fabric of a nation were torn apart. Most recently, revolution and tribal warfare in Rwanda have left the country devastated, with hundreds of thousands dead and millions more in refugee camps. The American Revolution was indeed violent. The total number of those who perished from wounds, from disease, or in prison, is estimated at nearly one percent of the population in 1780 and more than one in ten of all soldiers who served. As a percentage of the population, the losses were three times those of World War II, and were surpassed only by the Civil War. Yet, was this war *revolutionary* ? Was there a great social upheaval in society that ripped asunder the social fabric? You need to identify various social groups (socio-economic, racial, gender based). How did their position in society change as a result of the war? If no significant changes are noted, can you think of a better and more accurate name for this war?

Lesson VI
seminar: essay with discussion

New Rights in the Old South ?

Although the first feeble shots in the "War for Female Equality" may have been fired by Abigail Adams, Thomas Paine and Mercy Warren among others in the Revolutionary War period, the war is not over. The most recent battleground is the "Citadel"; Charleston, South Carolina's revered all male military institution.

Shannon Faulkner, 19, had her high school remove all references to her gender on her transcripts. She applied to the Citadel, was accepted, and then, once the institution discovered that Faulkner is a female, it rescinded its offer of admission. The Citadel is a tax supported male-only educational military college with proud roots back to 1840. It boasts that its cadets fired the first shots of the Civil War; at a union ship attempting to resupply union Fort Sumter in Charleston's harbor. Shannon Faulkner has sued saying that because public tax dollars are being used to support the college, she is unfairly being discriminated against and being denied equality before the law. The Citadel responds that "The girl says she wants to come in and be one of the boys. But the minute she comes in, the atmosphere changes. She ruins the whole concept of getting together and working on the same team." Some perceive Faulkner as such a menace, that numerous threats have been made against her life.

You need to go to the library or otherwise obtain at least one magazine or newspaper article dealing with this case. Read the article carefully to get more information than has been provided here. Citing specific quotations from that article, you need to formulate an answer to the following question:

"For what reasons should Shannon Faulkner be allowed
or not be allowed to enter the Citadel as a cadet?"

Remember to avoid the use of first prson ("I") syntax in your essay.
You may wish to address some of the following questions:

- is there a place for single gender educational facilities?
- is tradition an important concept to consider, or is it legally irrelevant?
- could Faulkner get a separate but equal education somewhere else?
- is separate but equal a dangerous concept with much larger implications?

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